



Extension Capacity Building Strategy

Developing Extension Excellence

Background

Grower groups across the nation play a critical role in the development of sustainable and profitable broadacre farm practices through their strong relationships with RDC's, research providers, State and Commonwealth government agencies, NRM regional organisations and industry.

These groups have several common features that aid them in collaborating to improve their collective effectiveness. These features include being:

- Farmer owned and driven
- Driving local innovation through the validation of research findings and extending these findings to their farmer members and non-members
- Are employers of local expertise to manage and operate the groups and conduct locally relevant research and extension.

In addition, many of these groups:

- Are mature with strong and trusted relationships providing significant value for investment. It's very expensive and time consuming to build this from scratch.
- They provide a regional context to suit variability across the country
- They have critical structures and capacity to facilitate group discussion, engage experts and validate research at the local level with demonstrations and trialling
- They can demonstrate their impact and have a continuous improvement philosophy.

Across Western Australia, South Australia and the eastern states there are now over 80 farm systems groups. The West Australian based *Grower Group Alliance*, the South Australian based *Ag Excellence Alliance* and several of the large grower groups in south-eastern Australia have made significant strides in developing a national representative approach to the issues and opportunities with the grower group network. A recent study of grower group in WA found that for every dollar invested in grower groups there was a \$10 return to the economy (in prep, AgKnowledge, 2017).

Grower groups are 'innovation brokers', bringing farm advisors, researchers, regional NRM organisations, resellers and farmers together. They provide much of the local/on-ground information and support "soft-infrastructure" that farmers seek, and this helps industry and government achieve their goals (Ruth Nettle, 2017).

In agriculture, technology meets adoption largely through the communication and extension efforts of grower groups and their networks. We could naively think that one-size-fits-all in terms of extending results to growers, however we need different strategies for different situations - one-size definitely doesn't fit all. Extension needs to be an equal partner in Research, Development and Extension complex. Into the future communication & extension needs to be given the recognition and respect it deserves. Extension strategies need to be well thought through and context driven to achieve the outcomes they

are targeted to achieve. Industry needs to build capacity in grower groups and their networks toward effective and successful delivery mechanisms.

The private sector is now a well-used information source for producers, however there is scope to enhance the capability of the private sector in delivering extension. Improving the capacity of private extension service providers will contribute to on-farm productivity gains and profitability.

This strategy has been developed with input from representatives of grower groups from Western Australia, South Australia, Victoria and southern NSW, the University of Melbourne and Landcare Australia Limited at a workshop conducted in Melbourne in August 2019.

Developing a National Extension Strategy for Grower Groups

This strategy aims to address the key issues affecting the long-term capacity of the national grower collective to drive the adoption of innovation and sustainable farm practices:

- Assess the skills required to provide effective leadership, management and technical skills for the operations of grower groups.
- Develop strategies for imbedding processes based on robust social science concepts and frameworks into extension projects.

As a collective, farmer driven grower groups need to demonstrate their value to a range of stakeholders if they are to continue to be effective in the future. There are range of issues and opportunities that grower groups could address at the national level that will increase their level of professionalism, including;

- pathways for careers in agriculture – there are limited opportunities to meet extension training needs;
- succession planning for groups;
- a universal mapping program available across organisations that provide; consistency in use and interpretation;
- research exchange program for university graduates.

The strategy will address:

- The challenges faced by the groups in terms of extension of R & D
- Agreement of the professional development program that will drive capacity building in the network.

Future Vision

Extension is always considered as an integral component of the RD&E complex and is integrated and resourced in R&D programs where appropriate.

Extension professionals are included in the design phase of extension projects. Extension design provides flexible frameworks to accommodate specific regional conditions and will adapting to seasonal challenges. There is a sustainable best practice model for extension that people and organisations can easily access. Extension programs will clearly describe what is being delivered, with high confidence in proposed impact.

Extension is respected as an important function in innovation and the embracement of transformational change in agriculture, having credible industry recognition, being well understood both in theory and practice. Practitioners can be identified according to the quality, effectiveness and innovativeness of their extension

Good extension skills are valued by industry as influential change agents. Extension programs are supported by a network of technology experts across Australia that are a resource to support groups identify extension challenges and design fit for purpose extension programs. There is a strong network of

peer support for extension initiatives. There will be a nationally consistent framework for extension training and development that is recognised in all higher educational institutions.

Grower groups increase their professionalism in the delivery of extension through being professional in the planning, design, delivery and evaluation of extension programs, and partner with other actors in extension – consultants, business advisers, researchers, etc.

Effectiveness of extension programs will be clearly demonstrated as a result of evaluation in a credible way. Good data on current and future extension preferences of target audience. Extension techniques and tools are widely understood and utilized by practitioners. Good data is available on current/ future extension preferences of target audience

Challenges and Opportunities

Challenges	Opportunities
<p>Resourcing extension programs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of control over how extension is done, it is dictated by contracts ● Funding bodies fund R&D, not extension activities ● Lack of resourcing to do extension well ● Diverse sources of funding with multiple objectives and reporting ● Limited knowledge of extension preferences in the modern industry <p>Farmer challenges</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Faster adaptation to faster changing challenges to farming ie markets, climate, water, pressures ● Sociology of change for famers with rapid change and threats ● Farmers are time poor with huge volume of information overwhelming for growers with some questioning the value ● Understanding what farmers want and need, and how to engage <p>Industry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Industry acceptance of extension as a critical professional part of adoption and innovation ● Antagonism between corporate agronomy consultants and independent agronomists <p>Grower Groups</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Are farming systems groups the best to lead extension? ● Grower groups place in the RDE works vs local services world ● Grower groups are not good at extension, however they do facilitate research well 	<p>Collaboration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Learning from experiences - a shared understanding of what does and doesn't work so we can collectively manage funders expectations ● Collaboration between the national GG's and stakeholders ● MOU from transactional partnerships ● Improve our sharing/ extension impact ● How to increase agency of farming systems groups through national collaboration ● Looking to understand the national and regional objectives of the National Grower Group Collective. ● A clear plan for what this project can deliver in building capacity for extension delivery ● Prioritise efforts <p>Capacity building</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Better understanding of how we can build capacity to deliver extension, developing a national framework for extension training ● Have clarity of Australian Ag extension needs in the mid to long term ● A clear vision for extension building in GG capacity in extension with common goals and actions ● Have a plan that we ca go with to industry to get buy in ● To know more about the capability development needs of grower groups ● Increase extension skills within farming groups

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of staff interest in extension • Willingness to externalize the issues • Disconnect between collectives in the extension space • Each group trying to develop own strategy • Industry changing at a different pace to grower groups • Few skilled growers willing and confident to lead a group <p>Extension knowledge, skills and capacity to deliver</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing what the best delivery model is • Lack of clarity about what extension is and how it is done • Resourcing organisations to build capacity - lack of investment in skills development • Few extension training opportunities for Farming Systems Groups, agronomists and industry • Lack of capacity and ability to maintain capacity in the regions to do extension well • Lack of innovation in extension 	<p>Extension development & delivery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic approach to project development • Define target audience – numbers, outcomes and specific needs, methodology • Look at innovation in extension to increase uptake • On-line solutions and options
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Definitions - What is extension

Extension

Supporting people to build the skills, confidence, motivation to change and adopt new technologies. Extension practitioners have skills in – communication, facilitation, marketing, coaching & mentoring

Innovation systems

A range of people, organisations, policies and institutions that come together for a particular purpose to take a concept through a development, demonstration process to achieve a change in the market. It is not fixed and it's changeable and defined by the change on the ground, not the increase in number of ideas, but the impact on the market.

Facilitation

Using a planned process to create an outcome for a group of people. The facilitators focus in on the process and the outcome not the content of the session. The content is provided by the group. Discussion groups use a facilitated learning approach where the group knowledge is accessed by the facilitator and information provided to “top up” knowledge rather than “tip it in”.

Communication

Providing information to the audience using a variety of mediums

- verbal, written, digital,

Good communication is planned and strategic, targeting it's audience to raise awareness on topics of interest.

Adoption

Achieving the practice change desired.

APEN's defines Extension as:

Australasia Pacific Extension Network (APEN) defines extension as working with people in a community to facilitate change in an environment that has social, economic and technical complexity. This is achieved by helping people gain the knowledge and confidence so they see the need for change and providing support to ensure it is implemented effectively.

Traditional extension approaches have focused on the *transfer of knowledge* and data, with a focus on the technical content of research with the assumption that the provision of data would create change.

People create change and the future of extension requires a shift from focusing entirely on technical content to include an understanding of people, decision making processes, impact of change and how people learn. Increasing the personal ownership in the change by engaging and focusing on the people increases the likelihood of adoption and practice change.

Skills / Competencies

Nine key competencies areas for an effective extension professional were identified by the National Grower Group Collective. Under each of these competencies a range of skills were listed. Each of the competencies were prioritised for their relative importance in developing an extension professional.

Extension planning and design (Highest Priority)
Project design - ability to design extension strategy to deliver the adoption challenge; design thinking Developing the value proposition Ability to identify & articulate adoption challenge Developing a monitoring and evaluation plan Planning an approach in achieving change - understanding the purpose and strengths & weaknesses of different activities for supporting change Understand deeply the one to many and one to few Engagement - ability to source the right people Social research skills Using the ADOPT model
Facilitation Skills (Second Highest Priority)
Engagement with the target audience Ability to summarise key points Ability to develop effective key messages How to read an audience Facilitation skills to identify and articulate the market challenge Facilitation of learning Ability to coordinate facilitate discussion Facilitation to achieve outcomes
Apply Technical expertise (Third Highest Priority)
Up to date on industry issues Understanding of agricultural systems and communities Systems thinking Good base understanding and knowledge of key technical issues as base to develop from Sound agronomic systems understanding to be able to explain how practices and on farm decisions interact Ability to manage & interpret data

Principles, people & tools for adoption (Equal Third Highest Priority)
<p>Knowledge of extension tools and ability to use and adapt them for audience needs</p> <p>Uncovering barriers to change</p> <p>Understand goals & aspirations of audience</p> <p>Principles of adult learning</p> <p>Understanding that people don't change just from information</p> <p>Understanding personality types</p> <p>Identifying target audience</p>
Professional Practice ((Equal Third Highest Priority))
<p>Sympathetic listener, empathetic</p> <p>Pragmatic optimist</p> <p>Articulate and persuasive</p> <p>Creative and critical thinker</p> <p>Engaging & supportive</p> <p>Calm under pressure</p> <p>Interpret and decipher true needs and pathways for extension</p> <p>Asking the right questions</p> <p>Foster collaboration</p> <p>Build credibility and trust</p>
Management & Implementation ((Equal Third Highest Priority))
<p>Experience with prioritization of target audience</p> <p>Effective organisational skills</p> <p>Ability to adapt & accommodate</p> <p>Manage changing circumstances & regional differences</p> <p>Time management skills</p> <p>Project management skills</p> <p>Ability to trouble shoot and problem solve</p> <p>Understanding when to use other expertise when appropriate</p> <p>Skills and knowledge in consultation processes & collaborating with partners</p> <p>Understanding of methodologies ie fact sheets, seminars etc.</p> <p>Knowledge of stages of attitudinal change</p> <p>How to develop a realistic outcome from an extension program</p>
Networking skills (Fourth Highest Priority))
<p>Stakeholder engagement – how to build trust</p> <p>Networking with a mix of people and organisations that add value to extension outcomes</p> <p>Developing and maintaining networks</p>
Communication (Fifth Highest Priority)
<p>Reporting</p> <p>Developing value propositions</p> <p>Professional newspaper quality writing & editing</p> <p>Scientific writing and communication</p> <p>Information and Tele Communication (ITC) skills including teleconferencing, webinars, social media, blogs, electronic newsletters</p> <p>Solid comms skills – written, verbal & physical</p> <p>Presentation skills – verbal and use of presentation aids (e.g. PowerPoint, charts, flip sheet, whiteboarding)</p>

Financial & Business driven decisions (This was considered an elective – not a High Priority)

Understand business goals of other organisations and how they fit into supporting change
How to work with other organisations
Understand economic drivers
Cost benefit of extension
Understanding of basic financial management tools

What's Available

Training and skill development

- Professional development programs
 - o There are a range of providers of extension short course professional development
 - o <https://www.apen.org.au/careers-training/professional-development>
 - o Ag Consulting Co - Introduction to extension, facilitation skills
 - o Ag Communicators
 - o Rural Directions
 - o TOP Facilitation training
- APEN provides conferences, mentoring program, webinars and road shows
- University
 - o micro credentialing with Uni of Melbourne through on-line modules
 - o <https://www.apen.org.au/careers-training/educational-pathway>

Who is this strategy targeting?

Across Western Australia, South Australia and the eastern states there are now over 80 farm systems groups. The Grower Group Alliance, the Ag Excellence Alliance and several of the large grower groups in the East have made significant strides in developing a national representative approach to the issues and opportunities with the grower group network. This group is currently identified as the *National Grower Group Collective*.

Grower groups are a significant force across Australia. In South Australia alone there are 17 organisations that have direct reach to around 75% of broadacre farmers in the state. In Western Australia, there are 45 groups reaching approximately 4000+ individuals from farming businesses.

The project has been in response to the trend towards increasing roles for industry and private services in delivering agricultural extension. This represents a shift away from traditional, government-funded extension services over the past 20 years.

The private sector is now a well-used information source for producers, however there is scope to enhance the capability of the private sector in delivering extension. Improving the capacity of private extension service providers will contribute to on-farm productivity gains and profitability.

This strategy is targeting current and potential project leaders from the private to enable them to build their extension delivery skills and knowledge that incorporates not only technical and facilitation expertise but also processes based on robust social science concepts and frameworks.

Stakeholders representing the national grower group collective who participated in the final project workshop and who will be driving the implementation of the strategy are:

Name	Role	Organisation	Email
Diana Fear	EO	Central West Farming Systems	diana.fear@dpi.nsw.gov.au
Jeanette Long	Facilitator	Ag Consulting Co	jeanette@agconsulting.com.au
Ang Hammond	Landcare Farming	Landcare Australian Limited	ang.hammond@landcareaustralia.com.au
Kelly Angel	EO	Birchip Cropping Group	kelly@bcg.org.au
Leighton Wilksch	Chair	Ag Excellence Alliance (SA)	leet@agbyte.com.au
Mark Stanley	EO	Ag Excellence Alliance (SA)	mark@regionalconnections.com.au
Kallista Bolton	Stakeholder & Comms	Grower Group Alliance (WA)	kbolton@gga.org.au
Rikki Foss	EO	Grower Group Alliance (WA)	rikki.foss@gga.org.au
Cam Nicholson	RD&E	Southern Farming Systems	cam@niconrural.com.au
Andrew Bulkeley	EO	FarmLink	farmlink@farmlink.com.au
Catherine Marriott	CEO	Riverine Plains	ceo@riverineplains.org.au
Bill Long	Chair	Ag Innovation & Research EP	bill@agconsulting.com.au

The original group who met in Melbourne at the beginning of the project in August 2019 and contributed to the early development of the strategy:

Name	Role	Organisation	Email
Diana Fear	EO	Central West Farming Systems	diana.fear@dpi.nsw.gov.au
Ruth Nettle	Professor	University of Melbourne	ranettle@unimelb.edu.au
Jeanette Long	Facilitator	Ag Consulting Co	jeanette@agconsulting.com.au
Shane Norrish	EO	Landcare Australian Limited	shane.norrish@landcareaustralia.com.au
Fiona Best	EO	Birchip Cropping Group	fiona.best@bcg.org.au
Caroline Walsh	Board Member	Birchip Cropping Group	Caroline.welsh@bcg.org.au
Leighton Wilksch	Chair	Ag Excellence Alliance (SA)	leet@agbyte.com.au
Mark Stanley	EO	Ag Excellence Alliance (SA)	mark@regionalconnections.com.au
Nicole Curtis	EO	Grower Group Alliance (WA)	nicole.curtis@gga.org.au
Brett Ryan	Business Manager	Southern Farming Systems	bryan@sfs.org.au
Andrew Bulkeley	EO	FarmLink	farmlink@farmlink.com.au
Lisa Miller	R&E Officer	Southern Farming Systems	lmiller@sfs.org.au
Pru Cook	Senior Manager R&E	Birchip Cropping Group	pru.cook@bcg.org.au
Bill Long	Director	Ag Consulting Co	bill@agconsulting.com.au

Strategy Development

Our promise to stakeholders is that grower groups can deliver better adoption of their previous, current and future investments. Our goal is to embed the extension in the R&D through involvement in future project design.

Strategy (<i>clear and tangible solutions</i>)	Actions	Who is responsible to take the lead?	By when?
Collaboration			
Learn from experiences - a shared understanding of what does and doesn't work so we can collectively manage funders	Identify key funders - be more accountable to grower groups, dialogue.	National Grower Group Collective.	Ongoing

expectations. No silos - clear on outcomes; collective voice.	Collectively approach and manage funders - communications. Raise the tide, bring everyone along! Funding criteria is not matching practical ability to implement. Increase the standard of operations. Set up a voluntary on-line forum to update stakeholders. Establish improved understanding project and direction. Establish clear leadership Establish good lines of communication. Differentiate between TOR vs MoU- what do we want? Articulate key needs and key learnings. Develop a strong, clear vision.	Refer to actions from the final project meeting.	
Develop collaboration between the national GG's and stakeholders	Strength if act in a consistent way, not get picked off by funders. Executive level sharing through the Grower Group collective.	National Grower Group Collective. Refer to actions from the final project meeting.	Ongoing
Develop an MOU from transactional partnerships.	In-kind calculations to be standardised and realistic. Share Cam Nicholson's spreadsheet	Ag Ex	June 2023
Improve our sharing/ extension impact	Establish what's working and what's not at the national level? Demonstrate extension impact – success stories, programs. Executive level sharing through the Grower Group collective	National Grower Group Collective. Refer to actions from the final project meeting.	Ongoing
Increase agency of farming systems groups through national collaboration	Develop the National Grower Group Collective scope and purpose.	National Grower Group Collective. Refer to actions from the final project meeting	October 2023
Looking to understand the national and regional objectives of the National Grower Group Collective.	Recognise the value of Drought Hubs to develop national programs and utilize this resource. Engage effectively with regional Drought Hubs.	Regional grower groups	Ongoing

Develop a clear plan for what can be delivered in building capacity for extension delivery.	Further develop and refine the Extension Excellence plan. Consider the GGA approach to extension capacity building. Establish national buy-in from key stakeholders to the vision and recommendations of the Extension Excellence plan.	National Grower Group Collective. Refer to next section in this plan.	October 2023.
Capacity building			
Develop a better understanding of how we can build capacity to deliver extension, developing a national framework for extension training.	Develop an understanding of what we would deliver, how we would deliver, plus human skills requirement – audit, self-assess, co-design. Continuous improvement of this plan.	National Grower Group Collective.	To be determined
Develop clarity of Australian Ag extension needs in the mid to long term.	Audit by each NGGC member of what could be delivered - Co-design of training package options including – Jeanette’s design, GGA /mentoring Group (embedding in A&E in projects), EATS (Jeanette & Bill Long). Continual development of this plan.	National Grower Group Collective.	To be determined
Develop a clear vision for extension building in GG capacity in extension with common goals and actions.	Develop a vision for the NGGC - goals and actions together – positioning statement, co-design. Continual development of this plan.	National Grower Group Collective.	To be determined
Develop an action plan that the grower group collective can go with to industry to get buy in.	Framework design (components) - discuss & author, co-design Continual development of this plan.	National Grower Group Collective. Refer to next section in this plan.	To be determined
Create a better understanding of the capability development needs of grower groups.	Accreditation levels – do we want this? Review the nine key competencies areas and associated skillsets in this strategy.	National Grower Group Collective.	To be determined
Increase extension skills within farming groups.	National Grower Group Collective leadership and succession plan Inclusion of additional grower groups to the collective.	National Grower Group Collective.	To be determined
Extension development & delivery			
Develop a strategic approach to project development.	Project development Look at GGA model.	National Grower Group Collective	To be determined

	<p>Establish a process for developing projects.</p> <p>Planning:</p> <p>Insights, analysis</p> <p>Identify funding sources / opportunities.</p> <p>Develop propositions.</p> <p>Identify if local / regional / national.</p> <p>Identify best for partners.</p> <p>Training program development</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Extension design - webinar series (e.g. Denise B, NZ RMPP) 2. Facilitation – skills, learning Webinar (e.g. Peter Newman, Ruth Nettle). 3. Evaluation – monitoring & evaluation, reporting back. 4. Mentoring 5. Project application 		
Define target audience – numbers, outcomes and specific needs, methodology.	<p>Determine the target audience: Producers, community, advisors, farming systems groups, Landcare?</p> <p>Identify the likely funders?</p> <p>Collaborate with key local influencers.</p>	National Grower Group Collective	To be determined
Look at innovation in extension to increase uptake.	<p>Leverage broader base of resources & tools</p> <p>Integrate extension tools – podcasts, field walks, etc.</p> <p>Share what farming groups are doing and what’s working.</p>	National Grower Group Collective	To be determined
Develop on-line solutions and options for extension delivery	<p>Develop podcasts, videos and other targeted communication products that sits adjunct to main engagement events.</p>	National Grower Group Collective	To be determined

Selling the strategy to industry

A key aim of this strategy to get broad industry acceptance and eventual buy in to further develop and implement this strategy. Some of the organisations identified for targeting and key contacts are:

Organisation	Key Contact	Approach
Natural Resource Management Regions	Kate Andrews (Chair) NRM regions in each grower group area of influence	National Grower Group Collective Farming group executives/ chairs
Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hub (x Eight)	Drought Hub Directors	Farming group executives/ chairs

Future Drought Fund	Consultative committee – Brent Finlay, Chair	National Grower Group Collective
Agri Futures	John Harvey, Managing Director Belinda Allitt, General Manager, Communications & Capacity Building	National Grower Group Collective
Australian Wool Innovations	State based Sheep Connect programs	National Grower Group Collective
MLA (ref 2020 RD&A strategy)	Cam Nicholson	National Grower Group Collective
National Farmers Federation	CEO	Farming group executives/ chairs
GRDC Regions – North, South & West	Regional Managers	National Grower Group Collective
Grower Group networks not currently engaged	Grower group alliances	Farming group executives/ chairs
Agri Business including Elders, Nutrien Ag Solutions, CRT	Company heads	National Grower Group Collective
Regional Development Australia	Regional Managers	Farming group executives/ chairs
Commonwealth Dept of Agriculture: National Landcare Program Future Drought Strategy National Soils Strategy	Section heads / directors.	National Grower Group Collective
State Govt Agriculture Agencies	State Department heads	Farming group executives/ chairs
Financial / accounting sector		Farming group executives/ chairs
Rural Finance Councillors	Lead organisations (rural business Support)	Farming group executives/ chairs
Drought Resilience Adoption and Innovation Hubs	Hub directors and Knowledge Brokers	National Grower Group Collective



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